



CitiZen of D.C.: Precision Modern Cuisine, with a Heavy Finish

Posted on [October 5, 2009](#) | [Leave a comment](#)

Let's start with this:

The anniversary dinner at [CitiZen](#) cost us \$350 for two, including paired wines for us both. This is not a complaint. We spent the money mindfully, without hesitation or coercion. But I hate it when people ooze about world-class food by an award-winning, steamin' *haute* chef as if no bill is attached.

It is. Expectations are high. Regrets loom as a possibility.

Few regrets materialized, and expectations were for the most part met.

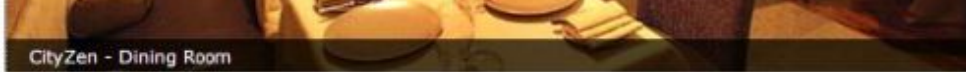


2GONOW: A REAL BETA

No, let's call it "pre-release." We've got pages with dummy text, half-baked text and no text at all. A lot of our stuff is borrowed or broken. But what you're watching is an experiment in travel webwork with an emphasis on real-time social content and wily, knowing hand aggregation. But for now we're just noodling around. For a more coherent explanation, visit our [About](#) page. Meantime, enjoy what you can.

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CitiZen is a five-year-old Washington, D.C. dining room operated by veterans of one of the best-regarded and -awarded restaurants in the nation [[The Inn at Little Washington](#), in Washington, Virginia.]. Chef Eric Ziebold is late of another of the best-regarded and -awarded restaurants in the nation [The [French Laundry](#) in Napa, California; not the [French Laundry of Fenton, Michigan](#), about which I have previously written]. He has a James Beard, a load of references placing him on the short list of “hot” chefs and an eye on a Michelin star.

CitiZen served us an extraordinary meal that was creative, even clever. The food was precise, most ingredients were locally sourced and just off the truck. It was vividly memorable, one of the best meals I’ve had.

But it all was inexplicably marred by poor pacing, servers with meaningful details about each dish to convey but frequently not understandable, two desserts too many [!] and, inexplicably, an errant kitchen hand that left several dishes heavy with oil or fat.

The short list of highlights:

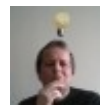
- Thin slices of fluke topped with a tomato sorbet, a frozen crimson puree that, when tasted from the same fork as the fish, provided one of the most surprising, invigorating sensations I’ve enjoyed at a restaurant.
- A disc of tenderloin so rare its inside was the color of watermelon. Although I didn’t try, I think I could have eaten it without chewing. It was ladled over with a splash of bouillon and accompanied by filaments of sweet tender onion the texture of Vietnamese vermicelli.
- Four pungent selections from the cheese trolley, chosen in concert with our dining hostess ["waitress" would be the wrong word]. They were accompanied by shot glasses of three different beers. One, a thick black beer called Old Raspustin, is brewed in Napa Valley.
- A dessert of fig layered with sweet cream cheese and delicate squares of pastry. Only after a few tastes did I realize I was eating an arch, high-end, wink-y-wink-y [but delicious] fig newton, a memorable finishing stroke of imagination from the kitchen.
- The wines were expertly paired, and of the sort I rarely know how to buy or drink. I can’t recall the details because, well, we

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BLOGROLL

were drinking them. But I know we were served among many other things a Portugese multi-varietal that was the predecessor of a Port later served with dessert. [Not only were the wines paired with the food, the wines were paired with the proper stemware.]

- [The City Traveler](#) High-quality indie site by veteran travel writers

USEFUL BOOKMARKS

All right, to the grease: It slid onto the plate throughout the meal. Orbs of garlicky mashed potatoes were heavy from a pointless roll in the oil. The focaccia was damp. The lamb steak was enswirled by an unctuous sauce.

And—*disaster!*—an ice cream with peanut butter “infusion” appeared with two rolls of creamy chocolate paste that were utterly wrecked with phyllo wraps as greasy as any egg roll from a cheap Chinese carry-out.

I’d recommend CitiZen for whenever a truly special celebration while in the region, any traveling foodist indulgence where one throws wallet to the wind, or an opportunity when a rich and generous lawyer friend picks up the tab.

But don’t get that ice-cream-and-chocolate dessert. What a shame to end such an inspired and well-contructed meal on such a heavy, joyless note.

2GoNow: Real Resources from Real People

Yelp You can never really tell with wisdom-of-the-crowd rating services, but [Yelp](#) has 68 reviews of CitiZen with an average rating of 4.5. Quite a few comments in the “best meal I’ve ever had” category.

Blog A smart, unfawning blog entry from [Boston Dreams and Michelin Stars](#) by Lance Martin, an amateur chef who runs marathons and has enthusiasm for both sports.

Online confessional Chef Grant Achatz of Chicago’s Alinea, a former French Laundry colleague of now-CitiZen chef Eric Ziebold, writes in the Atlantic online about the friends’ earlier [adventures of re-inventing classic cuisines](#). He refers to Ziebold onlyonce as a kind of schoolboy partner in foodie mischief. But his article provides a good perspective on the game Ziebold is playing. Also check out the well-informed comments at the end of the piece for more highbrow ruminations on “new fusion” cuisine.

A 2007 review, with guileless on-the-plate digital photos of the dishes served, from the blog [Veal Cheeks](#)

Interview Washington Business Journal [interview with Ziebold](#) in 2006.

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The 2GoNow3: Austin, Texas

Posted on [September 27, 2009](#) | [Leave a comment](#)

*Our regular 2GoNow3™ feature cuts through the online travelspatter by providing links to **the only three travel resources you need** to prepare for a trip.*

This week's 3fer: Everybody's favorite, if increasingly overexposed, Red Star Edge City. In chronological order:

[Austin: Keepin' it Weird](#)

By Beth D'Addono, The City Traveler

Friday, September 25, 2009

Full of pointers to a short list of good music venues and restaurants to check out. Tweet-size summary:

The only blue dot on the red map of Texas, Austin's town slogan is "Keep Austin Weird." Enough said. We were there.

[Off-Beat Austin? Rock On](#)

by Roy Furchgott, The Washington Post

Sept. 21, 2008

Solid high-points rundown for first-time weirdness pilgrims, with [details](#). Money quote:

In just one weekend there, I was photographed with El Vez, the Mexican Elvis; had drinks next to a guy with an ostentatious mustache and the garb of a 1920s movie cowboy; was overcharged at not one but two fine establishments; and was befriended by people who cheerfully claimed to have done jail time.

[The Austinist](#)

Insider blog provides a deeper dive, with high-snark notes on events and news that suggests the texture of-and provides pointers to-life as it's experienced by local hip-ners. It's the most popular resource of the users of the social bookmarking site [Delicious](#). Recent ripe observation:

The Mohawk offers up a hell of a future-look tonight, as even if the bands on this docket aren't familiar to you yet, give it time: they will be. With a trifold bill featuring not one, but two bands whose debut albums garnered the much sought-after Best New Music designation from the loved or loathed pillar of tastemaking, Pitchfork Media, this is one of those lovely opportunities to go to a show and later brag about it to all the fools who were a step behind.

2GoNow2™ bonus: Two 2.0 Tools

[Austin slideshow via Flickr](#): Irresistibly vivid visual overview

[Centered in Austin Twitter feed](#): Up-to-the-minute news and notes

Posted in [2GoNow3](#), [Austin](#), [Cities](#), [Culture](#), [Music](#), [Texas](#), [U.S.](#)

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Tagged [overexposed](#) but worthy, [weirdness](#)

Russia: On the Trail of Uncle Yakov

Posted on [September 19, 2009](#) | [Leave a comment](#)

Not long ago my son Jordan and I traveled to Russia, to learn what we could about great-great-great Uncle Yakov.

This ancestor, [Yakov Sverdlov](#), was among many other things a Big Dog Bolshevik-Vladimir Lenin's right-hand man, primary author of the Soviet constitution, leader of the political body that gave rise to the Soviet Union.

He was lucky enough to die a Bolshevik hero in 1918 of the Spanish flu. His colleagues lived long enough to face under Josef Stalin a fate not much different from the fate faced by the Tsar whom they replaced.



In St. Petersburg (l to r): Jordan, Eternal Flame to Revolutionary Martyrs, me

Our ancestral trip took us to Moscow and St. Petersburg in April 2009. We traveled to the places where he ran the government, held meetings and generally behaved as a leading communist functionary. The highlight moment, on our [father/son trip to Russia](#), written for The Washington Post. [June 14, 2009]

"Cover for me," my son Jordan whispers.

We are in Hall No. 19 of the Kshesinskaya Mansion in St. Petersburg, Russia, a faded beaux-arts pile built as a private home but seized in 1917 for use as headquarters of the nascent Bolshevik government. Today it is the Museum of Political History of Russia. Hall No. 19 was once the nerve center of the new regime. It features a desk lined with neat stacks of bundled documents, a wonderful old telephone, a small bookcase and, in the corner, a blood-red banner drooping between two wooden poles. Jordan intends to creep beyond the rope for a closer look.

.



The office of Yakov Sverdlov

I slyly return to the adjacent room to distract the drowsy museum attendant. I figure that asking a question in English will keep her tied up for a couple of minutes at least.

But suddenly an alarm's woo-woo shriek breaks the silence. The guard slowly pushes herself to her feet. By the time she reaches Hall No. 19,

Jordan is back on the lawful side of the rope, his face bearing the internationally recognized look of feigned innocence. The babushka points to the motion sensor on the wall and scolds him in a Slavic flurry. We retreat peaceably.

So ends our closest Russian encounter with our great-great-great uncle Yakov Mikhailovich Sverdlov, the man who from this very room commanded the Central Committee of the Russian Social Democratic Party of Bolsheviks — which is to say, ran the party that brought Communism to the country and launched the USSR. Jordan was hoping to sit in Uncle Yakov's chair and get a closer look at what was on his desk.

The article includes some [how-to info on planning a Russia trip](#), including getting a visa, where we stayed, train travel and some inside dope on a good Georgian restaurant.

2GoNow resources

Facebook [photo album of our Russian travels](#)

Flickr slide show of [Russian travel photos](#) posted in 2009

[Pre-Revolutionary Russia, in photos](#), as Sverdlov would have seen it

Bobbing-photo tag cloud of [Sverdlov images](#), courtesy Viewzi

The Other French Laundry: Fenton, Michigan

Posted on [September 13, 2009](#) | [2 Comments](#)

We traveled this summer to the renowned French Laundry restaurant, to enjoy the spectacular cuisine served at the birthplace of “New American” cuisine.

Actually, that’s a total lie.

We went to the [French Laundry](#) and had great meals, all right. But the restaurant of that name we visited is in Fenton, Michigan, a town outside the culinary capital of...Flint.



French Laundry, Fenton, Michigan. Courtesy John Ransom, [www.johnransom.com](#)

While Fenton is a fairly affluent and sophisticated area, even there the restaurant is an extraordinary outlier. Located in a wittily renovated cinder-block [!] stand-alone building, it’s designed and decorated with an unerring eye.

The low main dining room roof is extended upward with a low shaft of multi-colored glass windows. The tables and chairs are tastefully mismatched; coffee cups are thrift-shop cast-offs. The staff wear black. The vibe is stylish fun. [Photos.](#)

But go for the [food](#).

Okay, the chef is not Alice Waters [New American cuisine doyenne and founder of the "other" French Laundry in Napa, California]. But it's still spectacularly good. It's American, with a mix of comfort-food, French and [yes] New American twists. A few favorites:

Butter and Salame

Slices of hard salami; smear them with butter. You may need a nitro-glycerine chaser, but it's a wonderful meal-starter.

Chimichurri Pork Tenderloin

Served with a sweet Argentinian-style sauce

Turkey Meatloaf

Neither a camp resurrection nor a precious elevation, it's a hearty, nostalgic dish made with the usual ingredients plus a few chopped vegetables, high-end cheddar and a touch of Dijon mustard.

Blackened Grouper

Sweet, flaky fish with a spicy coat, topped with homemade salsa and a side of beans and rice.

Creme Brulee

Served in low dish, its body is a near-perfect mix of egg and cream flavors, the top a delicate pane of sweetness that yields easily to the spoon.

Michigan's economic troubles notwithstanding, The French Laundry isn't cheap. Dinner entrees average \$20; there's a good wine list and some smart matches on the menu. Lunches and breakfasts will cost you \$10 to \$15 per person.

No, it's not worth a visit to the greater Detroit/Flint/Ann Arbor/Lansing-ish region just for a meal there. But if you find yourself in that part of the country, it's worth a special trip. [Map](#).

2GoNow Resources

[Flickr slideshow](#)

[Real-time Tweets](#)

[Yelp reviews](#)

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